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ABSTRACT

This paper contains comparative literature reviews on higher education (HE) accreditation in Vietnam and the development of HE accreditation and assessment in the United States. The literature reviews are then used to examine the proposition that lessons can be learned from the development of HE accreditation in the United States that may be useful for informing the future development of HE accreditation in Vietnam. Among the lessons learned from the U.S. experience, five are particularly relevant: (1) common definitions must be established and continually updated; (2) diversification of HE institutions and delivery methods necessitate assessment models that focus on process and performance; (3) when HE systems are expanding rapidly, quality control mechanisms are needed to protect the students; (4) faculty, staff, and administrators must all be involved in the assessment process; and (5) there is a direct link between autonomy and accountability. (Contains 1 figure and 54 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Abstract

This paper presents a comparative literature review on higher education (HE) accreditation in Vietnam and the development of HE accreditation and assessment in the U.S. These literature reviews are then used to examine the proposition that lessons can be learned from the development of HE accreditation in the U.S. which may be useful for informing the future development of HE accreditation in Vietnam. Among the lessons learned from the U.S. experience, five are particularly relevant: (a) common definitions must be established and continually updated; (b) diversification of HE institutions and delivery methods necessitate assessment models that focus on process and performance; (c) when HE systems are expanding rapidly quality control mechanisms are needed to protect the students; (d) faculty, staff, and administrators must all be involved in the assessment process; and (e) there is a direct link between autonomy and accountability.

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HIGHER EDUCATION ACCREDITATION IN VIETNAM: LESSONS FROM ACCREDITATION IN THE U.S.

Introduction

Purpose

There is not much information published in English regarding Vietnam's current higher education (HE) system or in Vietnamese concerning Vietnam's approach to HE accreditation. In the U.S. literature, use of the word assessment can be confusing; therefore, analysis and interpretation are required to better understand the range of meanings and how characteristics of these meanings might be beneficial to accreditation efforts in Vietnam. This paper is based on a comparative literature review that examines lessons learned from the development of HE accreditation in the U.S. and how these lessons could be potentially useful for informing the future development of HE accreditation in Vietnam. There are many problems in Vietnam's HE system but one of the most troubling is the lack of linkage between the needs of the economic sector and the programs of the higher education institutions (HEI). The economy and the HE system intersect at the point of learning outcomes, and learning outcomes are emphasized in the U.S. assessment and accreditation processes. This paper adds to the body of knowledge regarding the Vietnamese HE system and contributes concepts for Vietnam's consideration as it works on developing accreditation literature and its own model.

Mode of Inquiry

Specific questions were used to guide each of the literature reviews. Vietnamese sources included books, conference proceedings, manuals, newsletters, and dissertations. U.S. sources comprised recent journal articles, accreditation handbooks, documents from

accreditation organization websites, and books. The resulting picture of U.S. HE accreditation and assessment was held up against Vietnam's current HE and accreditation situation to identify any potentially useful concepts and processes that could be drawn from the U.S. experience. Based upon the conclusions, some recommendations are provided.

Definition of Terms

Terms such as accreditation, assessment, and quality can be troublesome since their meanings may differ from one country to the next, or even within the same country. To minimize confusion, it is necessary to establish working definitions that will facilitate discussion of the literature reviews as well as the overall analysis.

1. *Quality*: "The most widely accepted definition of quality is 'fitness for purpose'. This allows institutions to define their purpose in their mission and objectives, so 'quality' is demonstrated by achieving these" (Woodhouse, 1999, p. 29).

2. *Quality assurance:* This includes "the policies, attitudes, actions and procedures necessary to ensure that quality is being maintained and enhanced" (Woodhouse, 1999, p. 30). Quality assurance can also indicate that an institution has achieved a minimum standard and thus it ensures accountability.

3. *Audit/Review:* This is a check on what organizations claim regarding themselves. "When an institution states objectives, it is implicitly claiming that this is what it will do, and a quality audit checks the extent to which the institution is achieving its own objectives" (Woodhouse, 1999, p. 30). The audit report is a description of how well the organization's claims match reality. The term audit and review are sometimes

used interchangeably. In the U.S., the term review is normally used for the accreditation process.

4. *Assessment*: This includes "the gathering of information concerning the functioning of students, staff and institutions" (Astin, 1991, p. 2). "The fundamental purpose of assessment is to examine and enhance an institution's effectiveness, not only in terms of teaching and learning . . . but also the effectiveness of the institution as a whole" (Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 1996, p. 1).

5. *Evaluation*: For the purpose of this article, evaluation refers to the judgement or "grade" assigned at the end of the accreditation process. For example, in the U.S. the accreditation organization has three options: (a) accredit, (b) accredit conditionally, or (c) not accredit the institution or program.

6. *Accreditation:* This is an evaluation that determines whether an institution qualifies for a specific status. "The status may have implications for the institution itself (e.g. permission to operate) and/or its students (e.g. eligibility for grants). "Other terms for accreditation are licensing or registration" (Woodhouse, 1999, p. 32).

Overview of the HE system in Vietnam

A brief description of the recent history, governance, and structure of Vietnam's HE system is essential to understanding the context that so strongly influences development of accreditation in Vietnam.

Brief Summary of Vietnamese HE History since Doi Moi

A watershed event took place in the history of Vietnam's HE system when the 6th Party Congress made decisions that resulted in the December 1986 adoption of *Doi moi*. "The term *Doi moi* in Vietnamese literally means renovation and refers to the process and

consequences of pursuing an open-market orientation while maintaining the principles of socialism as interpreted by the CPV [Communist Party of Vietnam]" (Sloper & Le, 1995, p. 3). After the introduction of this new policy, Vietnamese "higher education no longer had the sole purpose of supplying manpower for the state sector. It would now serve the market-based economy" (Tran, 1998, p. 170).

Prior to 1986 the Vietnamese higher education system emulated the former Soviet model. "In the Soviet model, separate research academies and specialist teaching universities and colleges were controlled by various ministries, including the Ministry of Education" (Farnes, 1997, p. 3). The system comprised monodisciplinary universities, separate research institutes, colleges, and junior colleges. A majority of the junior colleges were for training elementary and middle school teachers although some also trained in occupational areas such as accounting. It was the Ministry of Education's responsibility to ensure that the government's central 5-Year Plan be implemented, which meant establishing quotas for admission to HEIs based on labor force requirements. At the time of admission, the student was already matched to a job and therefore assigned to a specific field of study (Farnes, 1997).

After 1986, realizing that limited student access to higher education was one of the most challenging problems facing the Vietnamese higher education system, a new direction was taken through diversification of funding and types of institutions to increase the system's capacity. HEIs began charging tuition and in December 1988 the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), a reformed version of the previous Ministry of Education, authorized the establishment of Thang Long University, the first *nonpublic* HEI in Vietnam. Since then the nonpublic sector has grown to include three types of

institutions: (a) semipublic universities, (b) people-founded universities, and (c) the first foreign owned HEI in Vietnam, Australia's RMIT. By the 1997-1998 academic year the HE system comprised 16 people-founded institutions (MOET 1999; MOET, 2000).

Governance and Structure

The HE system in Vietnam is centralized and primarily governed by the MOET, as shown in the Appendix. "The Ministry of Education and Training is responsible for policy making guidance, and supervision in connection with all the education programs and the administration of the higher education institutions" (Dang, 1997, p. 363). But some monodisciplinary institutions report to other ministries, such as the Ministry of Health, and certain institutions, including colleges and junior colleges, report *administratively* to the provincial or city People's Committee.

In the year 2000, the HE system comprised 223 universities, institutes, colleges, junior colleges, and national defense schools. . By 2010, the country is expected to have 284 HEIs (MOET, 2001). According to The World Bank (1998), "between 1993 and 1995, the total higher education enrollments grew by 117% (from 162,000 to 354,000)" (p. 1). Between 1995 and 1997, student enrollments at the universities doubled (Kelly, 2000). Meeting the demand for access remains daunting: "Given that more than 65 percent of Vietnam's 80 million residents are younger than 26 these numbers are expected to continue growing" (Kelly, 2000, p. 3).

Another important characteristic of Vietnam's HE system is the speed and frequency of its changes: "The education system in Vietnam continues to undergo significant change at every level on an annual basis creating a very interesting and challenging environment both for the observer and for those who work within it" (IIE,

2001, p. 3). Viewed from a systems theory perspective, so many changes occurring so rapidly could result in systemic instability and associated quality issues since the system elements have difficulty staying synchronized. Concerns expressed by MOET and academics regarding the quality of the Vietnamese higher education system are justified. When a system grows and changes rapidly without having a suitably designed quality control process in place, the potential for institutions to fall below an acceptable level of quality increases significantly. Whether or not accreditation could create a equilibrium within the system is open to argument, but in Vietnam accreditation has emerged as a significant consideration. The efficacy of accreditation in addressing Vietnam's quality issues may depend heavily on the model that is developed and how it is implemented.

Accreditation in Vietnam

To examine Vietnam's emerging conceptualization of accreditation, four main questions have been asked of the literature: (a) what marks the beginning of the HE accreditation process in Vietnam, (b) what are its goals, (c) how is assessment accomplished, and (d) what problems have been associated with development of a quality assurance movement?

The Beginning of HE Accreditation in Vietnam and the Goals

Although Vietnam does not yet have an accreditation system in place, the literature indicates that a new HE accreditation structure is in the formative stage. The previously noted massive problems in higher education combined with rapid expansion of the system greatly increased the public's concern over quality issues. External pressures have also focused on the need for quality assurance measures. In 1996, the Government Higher Education Project (GHEP) was established with funding from the

World Bank to conduct active research on internal quality assurance processes (Nguyen, 2002). It can be said that the GHEP marks the beginning of Vietnam's quality assurance movement and associated accreditation research. However, without professional experts to help guide the development process, and input from government and institutional leaders regarding their particular concerns, the working group that was assigned responsibility for establishing and operating quality assurance activities found it impossible to make progress.

Only in 2000 when the National Workshop on Quality Assurance in Higher Education was held in Dalat, Vietnam was quality defined and matched with the higher education system's goals and objectives (Nguyen, 2000). At the same time, Quality Assurance (QA) Centers were established at Vietnam National University (VNU)-Hanoi and VNU-Ho Chi Minh City. Additionally, over 30 Vietnamese universities have received GHEP quality improvement grants. VNU-Hanoi (2001) developed ten criteria for institutional assessment, and on December 28, 2001, the Prime Minister approved the strategic plan of educational development 2001-2010. These events have drawn great attention from both government and HEIs. They also marked a renewal of the quality movement's initial 1996 efforts to begin.

The education development strategic plan is divided into two parts: (a) Stage 1 from 2001-2005 and (b) Stage 2 from 2006-2010. The goals stipulated for Stage 1 with regard to assessment are "to urgently establish and implement the accreditation system at all levels of education" (Ly, 2002, p. 9). Stage 2 then builds upon this accomplishment by focusing "on pushing the development and enhancement of the quality in education to achieve the strategic objectives and concrete criteria" (Ly, 2002, p. 9). This plan shows

the government's strong determination to establish and implement an accreditation function in Vietnam's primary, secondary, and higher education systems.

As a result of this strategic plan, a new office called the Quality Accreditation Division was established in the early part of 2002 within MOET's Department of Higher Education (Pham, 2002). The Division is working in close collaboration with QA Centers at the two national universities and GHEP to formulate a short and long-term plan to establish a quality assurance infrastructure for Vietnam's higher education system.

The Current Assessment Process

The current method of assessment is based on the one used prior to *Doi moi* (Pham, 2000). Pham (2000) states that academics are "accustomed to the old managerial system, all the inputs were controlled centrally and all the quality conditions were provided centrally. . . . Performance criteria of HEIs were not different and were controlled by the Ministry of Higher Education and Vocational Schools" (p. 260). Diversification of the HE system has meant that inputs are from different sources, and MOET is no longer the only organization determining the criteria for assessing the training process. Pham (2000) argues that "the use of set evaluative performance criteria is necessary and urgent if we would like to manage the control of HE quality" (p. 260).

Doan (2000) also asserts that "it is the diversity of educational programs and their uneven standards that has created a confusing range of qualifications. This issue has so far confused the public and prospective employers" (p.37). Thus, according to the literature, diversification of the HE system has created a situation in which there is a critical need to establish a set of evaluative criteria to assure the quality of education.

The main form of evaluation currently emphasizes accountability through quality control. The primary evaluative tools are examinations and financial audits to ensure that people strictly observe the rules and regulations. "HE quality has not been evaluated according to criteria of the input, process and the output . . . . Our HE system has not established a periodical report line with stipulated criteria from HEIs" (Pham, 2000, p. 259). Pham (2000) says that HEIs do not solicit feedback from graduates and employers to determine what changes should be made to the curriculum and training. What this means is that there is no feedback loop from outside the HEI and consequently what the students are learning may not be relevant to workforce needs.

Traditional mechanisms used by Vietnamese universities for assuring teaching quality are self-evaluation of academic staff and peer evaluation within a discipline. At the national level, along with universities, MOET is the main governmental organization responsible for the quality of university training and management. In other words, MOET has issued regulations and evaluation criteria for universities to use in controlling the quality of teaching.

Student learning, similarly, is assessed based upon the old system (Pham & Sloper, 1995). The Vietnamese society and education system have changed but assessment methods in HE have not yet been renovated. For assuring the quality of learning in higher education, there is a control system with three main kinds of examinations in three phases: (a) entry examinations, (b) after course examinations during the learning process, and (c) graduate examinations (Nguyen, 2002).

Regarding the current assessment methods, many students think "that the lecturer's evaluation of their assignments and examinations are based too much on

evidence of knowledge which has been learnt by heart; and . . . lecturers pay inadequate attention to . . . creativity and the development of critical thinking" (Pham & Sloper, 1995, p. 106). Tran, Lam, and Sloper (1995) add that "the variety of evaluation practices, most of which depend heavily on examinations, tend to reflect the experience of academic staff and the disciplines or institutions in which they completed their final degrees" (p. 86).

This shows that assessment in Vietnam is deeply rooted in the positivist perspective as described by Gray (2002): learning outcomes are evaluated in terms of student behaviors that are primarily determined by "norm-referenced or criterion-referenced tests, performance measures, and other forms of objective testing" (p. 53). Tests based on memorization of materials and the use of standardized tests measure only a part of student learning. Because the approach reveals many weaknesses, options for changing to new mechanisms of quality assurance are being sought (Nguyen, 2002). The teaching methods are directed at teaching students what to think without also teaching them how to think. The standardized and summative tests tend to reinforce this approach, although the government has indicated that it wants students to be able to problem solve and function in the global economy. As argued by Pham (2000), there is a need to develop a more inclusive evaluative criteria for the assessment of student learning.

Problems Faced by the Quality Assurance Movement

An important factor in developing an understanding of the Vietnamese HE context is to be aware of the problems that it, and its efforts toward quality improvement face. There is an acute need for increased system capacity to satisfy the continuing high demand for access but the most important and formidable problem of the Vietnamese

higher education system lies in the budget. Inadequate funding results in low staff salaries, low quality instructional methods, and poorly stocked libraries. Other problems include "lack of qualified faculty, low secondary education standards, . . . graduate unemployment, lack of autonomy, lack of good management, lack of accountability, and a brain drain out of rural regions" (Oliver, 2002, p. 110). Although accreditation cannot address all the problems, the quality improvement processes associated with accreditation could help HEIs to be more efficient and effective in using existing resources. Yet there are four significant challenges that must be faced in developing a HE quality assurance system: (a) HE quality is low when compared with the demands of society, (b) system wide evaluative criteria and quality standards do not exist, (c) mechanisms, structures, and staffs are not adapting to the new methods of management, and (d) quality management has not been introduced into HE reform (Pham, 2000, p. 251).

In brief, the literature review shows that little has been written about HE assessment and accreditation in Vietnam. The primary reference source is a 2-year state funded "research study on establishing a set of evaluative criteria used in the Vietnamese higher education institutions" during 1999-2000 (Nguyen, 2001, p. 178). Nevertheless, six themes can be identified in the existing literature.

First, new assessment concepts have been introduced by taking examples from foreign experiences, such as the U.S., Great Britain, China, Thailand, and the Philippines. While this approach has been useful, it has also created an element of confusion in the language of the literature with regard to terms and definitions. Vietnamese terms and concepts used in different sources are not consistent with each other. Most authors try to deal with this problem by writing the English equivalents after the newly introduced

Vietnamese terms. For example, to denote the same notion "quality audit", both terms '*Tham dinh chat luong tu ben ngoai*' (Pham, 2000, p. 94), and "*Kiem soat chat luong*" (VNU-HCMC, 1998, p. 33) were used. Another striking example of this is that several authors define the term "quality" differently. Bogue and Saunder (1992) and Green (1994) (as cited in Pham, 2002) say that "quality is the fitness of claimed missions and achieved results of objectives within the publicly accepted standards" (p. 45). Duong (2000) states that "the quality of HE refers to three aspects: quality of curriculum, quality of teaching and quality of learning" (p. 264). VNU-HCMC (1998) defines quality as "a combination of all the traits or characteristics of a product or service related to its ability to meet a given need" (p. 33).

Second, the literature shows that the government, educators, and researchers are making an effort to establish and implement an accreditation system as soon as possible (Duong, 1998, 1998a; Lam, 1998a; Ly, 2002; Pham, 2000). This effort has advantages as well as disadvantages. The advantages are clear in that the process of establishing a national quality assurance system through accreditation helps institutions to be more aware of the quality they provide and may motivate them to put additional effort into improving it. The disadvantages include the danger of increasing public doubt concerning the quality of higher education institutions if failures appear during the implementation process. Additionally, because of the desire to use experiences from other countries, quality assurance methods may be adopted without giving careful consideration to their suitability for Vietnam's context. In actuality, there are three main factors that will potentially affect implementation of any other country's quality assurance system in Vietnam: (a) inexperience, (b) cultural differences, and (c) a lack of appropriate

mechanisms for quality assurance (Nguyen, 2002). At this stage of discussion concerning accreditation, the literature does not detail the roles of HEI faculty or staff.

Third, a few institutions have demonstrated initiatives in carrying out quality assurance measures on their own. VNU-HCMC examines its affiliates using five assessment criteria "to evaluate the graduate training quality at institutions, institutes, [and] departments under VNU-HCMC" (VNU-HCMC, 2001, p. 24). The five criteria, each comprising five to ten indicators, are (a) "procedures, training regulations, programs, training content and organization;" (b) "personnel;" (c) "human resources for training and student's support;" (d) "capacity of scientific research for production and society;" and (e) quality of incoming and graduating students (VNU-HCMC, 2001a, pp. 1-7). Several centers within institutions have also been established in the last few years to conduct research on criteria for internal institutional quality assurance (Nguyen, 2002).

Fourth, there is a heightened awareness of the important impact that an "accredited" status has on foreign universities (Dieu, 2002; Nhom PV Giao duc, 2002). In the context of increasing globalization, Vietnam needs an accreditation system to ensure that its HE system and students are accepted internationally.

Fifth, the literature shows a great concern for the poor quality of HE, especially as Vietnam strives to meet the increasing demand for access by expanding the public and nonpublic HE sectors. One important issue of Vietnamese higher education is that universities are short of highly qualified teachers (Nguyen, 2000). Most institutions do not have adequate staff development plans. The lack of appropriate qualifications and experience seriously hampers the attempt to upgrade teaching materials and adopt advanced practices and methods of delivery (Nguyen, 2000). The senior faculty in many

of Vietnam's universities are older, conservative, and unwilling to change (Oliver, 2002). Additionally, there is a lack of coordination in the use of existing teaching staff between institutions, especially between the public and nonpublic universities. Without well-qualified staff, higher education takes more time to develop.

Other significant problems relate to teachers' attitudes toward changing their teaching methodologies and their motivation to improve teaching quality. It is reported that, in general, teachers' attitudes toward methods of quality improvement in teaching are relatively negative. Teachers tend to give low grades for any improvement efforts that do not match their traditional expectations (Berlie, 1995; Dang, 1997; Lam, 1998). Generally, the literature places a great emphasis on the importance of training the teaching faculty as the first task in improving quality. (Vo, 2002; Minh, 2002; Dang, 1997). Yet, the writers seem to stop at this point. They do not say how to include teaching assessment in the accreditation process.

A final point drawn from the literature is that Vietnam currently lacks the legal foundation necessary for carrying out the accreditation process. The normal procedure in Vietnam is to first place requirements in the education law, which is then implemented through MOET's directives. In addition, teaching and learning management systems at the central governing body and at Vietnamese universities have been considered slow, ineffective, and insufficient. The HE administrators show a lack of management experience and skills in the new environment, which is meant to simultaneously enhance institutional autonomy and accountability. Mr. Nguyen Minh Hien (1998), Minister of Education and Training, argues that lax management is a major culprit in the quality problems faced by Vietnam's HE system.

Accreditation Development in the U.S.

Two questions were particularly pertinent in understanding the relationship between U.S. accreditation and Vietnam: (a) what is the connection between accreditation and assessment, and (b) what is the history of thought and action regarding HE accreditation and assessment.

The Relationship between Accreditation and Assessment

Gray (2000) states that accreditation dates back to the 1920s when it was initially "devised" and subsequently given impetus by the North Central Association of Schools and Colleges (p. 49). But Hacleroad (1980) traces the first accrediting agency back to the State University of New York in 1787. Interestingly, accreditation and assessment did not develop together. Ewell (2002) argues that the U.S. HE assessment movement officially began with the First National Conference on Assessment in Higher Education held in Columbia, South Carolina during the fall of 1985. The significance of this movement is indicated by Tobin's (1994) statement that since about 1988 "accrediting bodies have moved beyond reports based on consensus to asking questions about education quality . . . . These new issues include general education, the assessment of effectiveness outcomes and diversity" (p. 27). Assessment for the purpose of facilitating student learning and institutional improvement were new, and had to be included by revising the accreditation standards (Mentkowski & Loacker, 2002). Importantly, assessment enabled accreditation to focus on "the crux of the matter, student learning, after decades of fixation on surrogates: the resources and processes that were assumed to lead to quality" (Wright, 2002, p. 242).

A History of Thought and Action in Accreditation

The context of higher education during the late 19th century was marked by confusion that gave impetus to action. New disciplines were developing, there were challenges to the classical curriculum, the HE system was diversifying into different types of institutions, and the number of institutions was increasing rapidly (Hacleroads 1980; Brint & Karabel, 1989). To address these problems the educators formed four regional accrediting agencies. The U.S. approach to regulating colleges and universities took root from two quite different traditions, French and "English" (Tobin, 1994, p. 26). The French model was centralized with an external authority assuming responsibility for ensuring quality while the British model depended upon careful self examination and peer review (Tobin, 1994). The U.S. adopted characteristics from both approaches: (a) an extrinsic requirement to protect the public through accountability and (b) an intrinsic quest for improvement through peer review. Thus, as the U.S. began to develop an accreditation system, it exhibited two characteristics that are evident in Vietnam today: (a) the HE system was undergoing diversification and rapid growth resulting in government and public concern about quality, and (b) the U.S. examined the accreditation systems of other countries and adopted characteristics that were suitable for its own context.

At least five persistent problems have affected the development of accreditation in the U.S.: (a) confusion over definitions, (b) the need to deal with an increasingly diversified HE system, (c) proliferation of accrediting associations in specialized programs, (d) the need to protect consumers from "diploma mills," and (e) concern that the state and federal governments would assume greater authority over accreditation thus

reducing the level of professional and institutional autonomy within HE (Harcleroad, 1980, p.24).

Change, a phenomenon very familiar to Vietnam's HE system, has a significant impact on terminology and definitions. In 2000, U.S. regional accrediting agencies began major renovations. One of the agencies, the North Central Association, has revised its standards based upon a paradigm shift from "assuring teaching of students to one of assuring student learning" (Crow, 2002, p. 20). This is an important paradigm change for Vietnam to consider. Although the accrediting agencies are now emphasizing learning, "few phrases are more vexing to institutions and accreditors than student learning outcomes, partly because of confusion about just how the phrase is used" (Eaton, 2001, ¶ 3). As this field continues to grow and the paradigms change, new terms develop and definitions evolve. This problem is compounded in Vietnam by studying models from several countries that use terms differently.

Diversification continues to increase with virtual institutions, corporate providers, degree or non-degree granting as well as for profit and nonprofit institutions (Eaton, 2001). Combining the need for quality assurance with the variety of institutional and programmatic models that have developed forces institutional accreditation to focus on process and performance: "[It] should operate in a single mode that accommodates all of postsecondary education" (Harcleroad, 1980, p. 4). Although Vietnam's system is highly centralized, it has a variety of HEIs including public and nonpublic institutions, multi and monodisciplinary universities, research institutes, colleges, junior colleges, a new multimodel community college system. Therefore, a process and performance oriented accreditation model may be beneficial.

The third recurring problem, proliferation of specialized programmatic accrediting associations, has existed since the early 1900s (Harcleroad, 1980). Today research universities may belong to 20 or 30 specialized accrediting organizations, which is costly, creates multiple visits, and can result in conflicting recommendations (Glidden, 1998). Subsequent to a conference held by MOET in December 2002 and attended by representatives of 40 HEIs, MOET made a decision to begin with programmatic rather than institutional accreditation. Although multiple accrediting agencies would probably not be formed, having numerous program accreditations could create some of the same problems experienced in the U.S., including expense and conflicting recommendations.

The fourth problem, concern over diploma mills became acute in the 1930s and led to discussions regarding the establishment of state standards and accrediting (Harcleroad, 1980). With the rapid increase in the number of nonpublic HEIs in Vietnam and the international reputation they have been developing for poor quality (Lopatin, 2001), Vietnam could also soon be faced with a difficult diploma mill problem.

Since the 1930s there have been periods of strong pressure to increase the federal and state governments roles in accreditation but the voluntary agencies have succeeded in maintaining their positions by periodically reforming the accreditation concepts and methods. The North Central Association of Colleges and Schools developed an alternative accreditation process, the Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP) that was implemented in 1999 and, according to Gose (2002), "is the most radical of several new efforts by the regional accrediting groups to invigorate the process" (p. A25). The AQIP comprises five parts: (a) self assessment, (b) action projects, (c) strategy forum, (d) systems portfolio, and (e) accreditation (Gose, 2002; The Higher Learning Commission,

NCA, n.d.). Prior to their inclusion in AQIP, institutions must conduct a self assessment either using a quality survey instrument or a qualified outside consultant to identify "opportunities for improvement" (Gose, 2002, p. A26). The HEI selects three or four challenging goals (action projects) related to the improvement of student learning and works to achieve them within 3 years. Updates must be submitted annually. Toward the end of the 3-year period, institutions must submit a portfolio that "explains in 100 pages or fewer all the major systems the institution uses to accomplish its mission" (Gose, 2002, p. A-26). This portfolio is examined by quality review experts. The accreditation decision is based upon progress made toward achieving the goals and reaccreditation is done every 7 years.

According to Gose (2002), there is speculation by experts that Washington DC will not find the AQIP acceptable because it is heavily weighted on the side of collaboration for quality improvement and is light on accountability. This is an important consideration for Vietnam. Two types of program reviews have evolved in the U.S. that enable a separation of purposes and an easing of the troublesome dichotomy between improvement and accountability. When quality improvement is the goal, normally internal reviews are conducted, and they are formative in nature. When the goal is accountability, these reviews are normally conducted by an external organization such as an accreditation or state agency, and the approach is summative (Palomba, 2002). The Vietnamese HEIs tend to view an external review by MOET as being an inspection thus the concept of accreditation becomes somewhat threatening. The idea of selecting a few quality improvement goals and demonstrating progress over a 3-year period may be

something that the institutions could do in terms of resources, and it would provide training opportunities in quality assurance and improvement processes.

A History of Thought and Action in Assessment

During the 1980s there was increasing dissatisfaction with the U.S. HE system emanating from both inside and outside of the academy. Although attendees of the first national assessment conference in 1985 chose to participate based upon varying motives, "clear to all were the facts that they had few available tools, they had only a spotty literature of practice, and they had virtually no common intellectual foundation on which to build" (Ewell, 2002, p. 8). Today, with the shift from relying on quantitative standards to measuring student preparedness in terms of learning outcomes, the definition of "outcomes" has, as noted previously become problematic (Glidden, 1998; Eaton, 2001). Desired outcomes can be conceptualized in many different ways, such as having a job after graduation, mastering essential skills for the student's chosen occupation, or improving faculty development and general education programs (Glidden, 1998). If accreditation is to become an effective quality tool in Vietnam, desired outcomes must be clearly articulated by MOET and the individual HEIs.

Another difficult obstacle that has impeded progress in both the development and implementation of U.S. assessment models is ideology. Positivists tend to use objective tests and evaluation models adopted fron e business sector while subjectivists rely on experienced experts (Gray, 2002). Development of the assessment plan tends to be positivist and is usually accomplished by administrators who prefer easily quantifiable, objective, management-oriented factors. When it comes to implementation, faculty, who are often subjectivists, and staff may have no sense of commitment because they had no

part in developing the plan (Gray, 2002; Peterson & Vaughn, 2002). According to Tobin (1994) "anyone even remotely connected with higher education understands, as a first law of operations that you cannot get positive change without informing and involving faculty" (p. 33). This concept will be problematic in Vietnam where most of the faculty must moonlight to support their families, but faculty involvement is critical to quality improvement.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Analysis of the two literature reviews supports the proposition that lessons can be learned from the development of HE accreditation in the U.S. which may be useful for informing the future development of HE assessment and accreditation in Vietnam. Clearly the HE systems of the U.S. and Vietnam are quite different from each other. The U.S. is an advanced country with a decentralized HE system while Vietnam is a developing country with a centralized HE structure. Yet, there may be some historical commonalities. The early U.S. HEIs bear some resemblance to Vietnam's situation today. They were seeking an orderly way to operate amid rapid change and diversification. This necessitated developing a means for ensuring quality, which was an accreditation system that primarily depended upon quantitative indirect measures of success. The U.S. started focusing on assessment of learning outcomes in 1985 and at this time assessment research, literature, and tools were not yet developed. The body of knowledge has grown considerably since then and learning outcomes have been emphasized in recent renovations by several of the regional accrediting agencies.

At least eight lessons and corresponding recommendations can be drawn from the literature. First, common definitions need to be established and updated as accreditation

and assessment models evolve. The MOET should develop and distribute a set of standard terms and definitions for Vietnam's accreditation program with the realization that these will require periodic review and updating.

Second, as the HE system diversifies into different types of institutions and delivery methods, the accreditation system must be more dependent upon assessment models that focus on process and performance in relation to learning outcomes rather than merely on a set of finite, positivist criteria or standards. In developing an assessment process that articulates with accreditation, Vietnam should be mindful of the need to include subjectivist as well as positivist measures, particularly for assessing learning outcomes, and to develop an approach that accommodates differences among institutions. Additionally, faculty, administrators, and staff should be included throughout the entire assessment process.

Third, the implementation of programmatic accreditation can result in a proliferation problem that creates multiple visits, the potential for conflicting recommendations, and increased costs. Although MOET returned to its original idea of beginning with institutional accreditation in April 2003, it remains interested in developing a structure for program accreditation as well. If Vietnam does implement programmatic accreditation, care must be taken to control the number of site visits since too many visits could have a negative effect on quality by using funds that are needed for academic programs or creating confusion over institutional priorities, particularly at multidisciplinary HEIs.

Fourth, a rapidly expanding HE system that is simultaneously diversifying must protect students against poor quality programs and diploma mills by conducting periodic

assessments to ensure a sustained acceptable level of quality once the government approves an institution to operate. MOET, in cooperation with other responsible ministries, should conduct periodic assessments using site visit reviews by either trained peers from other HEIs or an accrediting body.

Fifth, in Vietnam, more research on assessment will be needed to develop an indigenous body of literature and instruments, as was done in the U.S. during the 1980s. The U.S. accreditation organizations have periodically looked at work done by other countries, and this is a good starting point for Vietnam. As the Vietnamese literature suggests, "reinventing the wheel" represents wasted effort. Research should be conducted to identify the specific characteristics of various assessment models used throughout the world, beginning with those accreditation and assessment models that have been implemented in countries with centralized education systems. These models can be compared to the specific objectives that Vietnam wants to achieve through its accreditation program. The potential success of the model can be evaluated based upon how well it meets these objectives and fits Vietnam's context. Vietnam should also encourage some of its graduate students who are studying abroad to develop expertise in accreditation and assessment, as well as request the assistance of expert practitioners from other countries. The new Fulbright Senior Specialists Program might be an excellent means for obtaining U.S. assistance.

Sixth, a gap often arises between assessment planning and implementation because only a few, usually positivist, administrators do the planning. Vietnam can ameliorate this problem by including administrators, faculty, and staff in the entire process and by rewarding those who actively participate, especially the faculty, with

incentives such as lower teaching loads or additional monetary compensation from the GHEP fund, managed by MOET.

Seventh, there are a variety of ways to formulate an approach to the accreditation process. The latest innovation in the U.S. is the North Central Association's AQIP. A derivative of the AQIP that has been customized for the Vietnam HE context could be piloted by MOET at selected HEIs. These HEIs would identify one to three quality improvement goals and work on these over a 3-year period. Annual reports would be submitted to MOET and the HEIs that demonstrated substantial quality improvements could be rewarded with additional funding for their continued initiatives. If the pilot program were successful, the model could be updated with lessons learned and then implemented at other HEIs.

Eighth, accountability and increased autonomy are linked; the former is essential to having the latter and maintaining a quality system. Institutions in Vietnam desire more autonomy and this can be enabled through the accreditation process with self assessments and periodic reviews by an accrediting body comprised of the ministries having responsibility for HEIs. MOET could chair the accrediting body and coordinate the visit schedules.

It seems unlikely that an existing accreditation model in another country, such as the U.S., can completely fit Vietnam's situation. But by conducting comparative education research, Vietnam can learn from the experiences of other countries and use these lessons in forming its own accreditation system that is tailored to its own unique requirements.

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Appendix

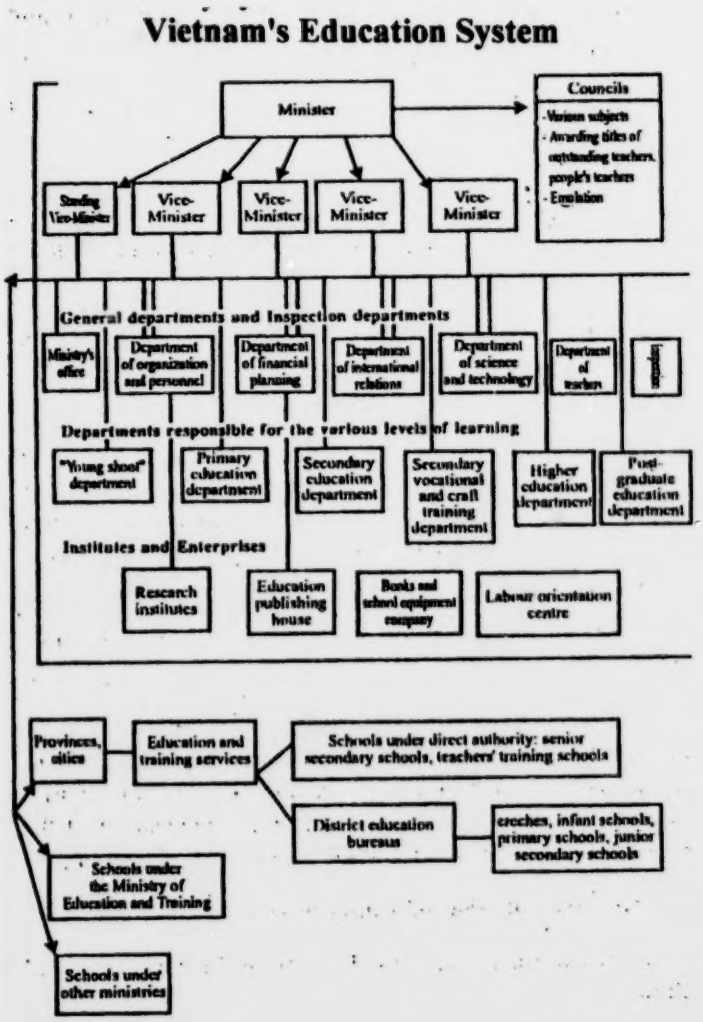

Figure. Ministry of Education and Training organization chart and affiliated entities.[1]

[1] From *Vietnam's education: The current position and future prospects* by Pham, Minh Hac (1998), page 52. Printed with permission of the author.

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